

BEFORE I KNEW WHO I WAS



*A Story of Resilience, Discovery,
and the Quiet Quest for Identity*

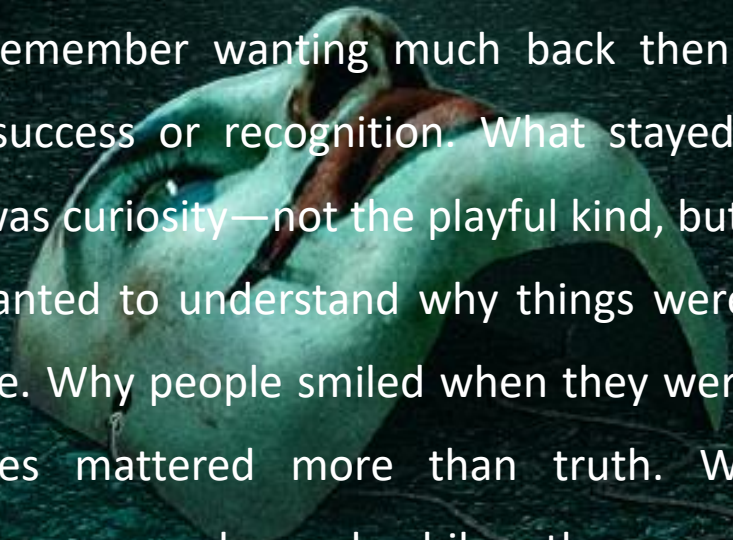
SSEBUKO ETHAN

Chapter 1: A Quiet Childhood

"I'm writing this before my life becomes something special, because I'm afraid that if I wait, my story will never be told."

My life didn't begin with a clear purpose; it began with questions I didn't yet know how to ask. As a child, I didn't have the language to explain what I felt—only the feeling itself: a quiet sense that the world was larger, heavier, and more mysterious than people around me seemed to admit. While others moved through their days naturally, I observed. I noticed patterns, silences, and moments that felt important even when no one else reacted to them.

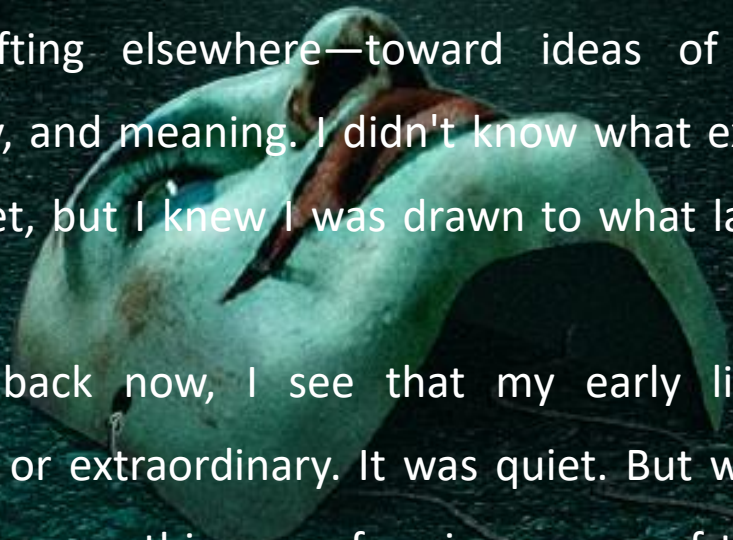
I don't remember wanting much back then. I wasn't chasing success or recognition. What stayed with me instead was curiosity—not the playful kind, but a deeper one. I wanted to understand why things were the way they were. Why people smiled when they were hurting. Why rules mattered more than truth. Why some questions were welcomed while others were quietly discouraged. I learned early that not every thought was meant to be spoken out loud.



As I grew older, I realized that life wasn't only about existing; it was about fitting in. And fitting in came with instructions no one clearly explained. School, family, society—all of it carried expectations, and I tried to follow them, even when they felt unnatural. There were moments I felt invisible, and moments I felt exposed, but rarely did I feel fully understood. Still, I kept moving forward, because that's what you're taught to do.

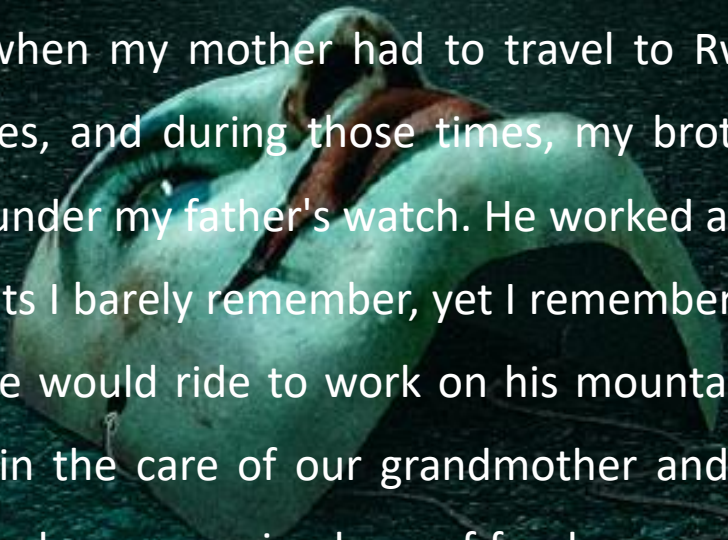
With time, that sense of difference didn't disappear—it sharpened. The more I learned about the world, the more questions surfaced. I became aware that life was slowly guiding me toward a path that felt safe, predictable, and approved. At the same time, my mind kept drifting elsewhere—toward ideas of distance, discovery, and meaning. I didn't know what exploration meant yet, but I knew I was drawn to what lay beyond comfort.

Looking back now, I see that my early life wasn't dramatic or extraordinary. It was quiet. But within that quietness, something was forming: a way of thinking, a resistance to shallow answers, a hunger to understand not just how to live, but why. I didn't know who I was



becoming—only that staying the same felt impossible. When I think back to my childhood, I don't remember specific dates or clear milestones. What I remember instead are feelings—the way certain moments stayed with me longer than they should have. I was present, but often inward, watching the world unfold while trying to understand my place inside it. Childhood, for me, wasn't loud or dramatic; it was observant and reflective, filled with small experiences that quietly shaped how I saw people, rules, and myself.

My father played a central role in those years. To me, he was more than a parent. He was my role model, my close friend, and someone I deeply cared for. There were periods when my mother had to travel to Rwanda for her studies, and during those times, my brother and I grew up under my father's watch. He worked as a chef in restaurants I barely remember, yet I remember his effort clearly. He would ride to work on his mountain bicycle, leave us in the care of our grandmother and relatives, and return home carrying bags of food—sometimes two of them. One for our grandmother, and one for us. He gave without complaint, even when we couldn't afford



much.

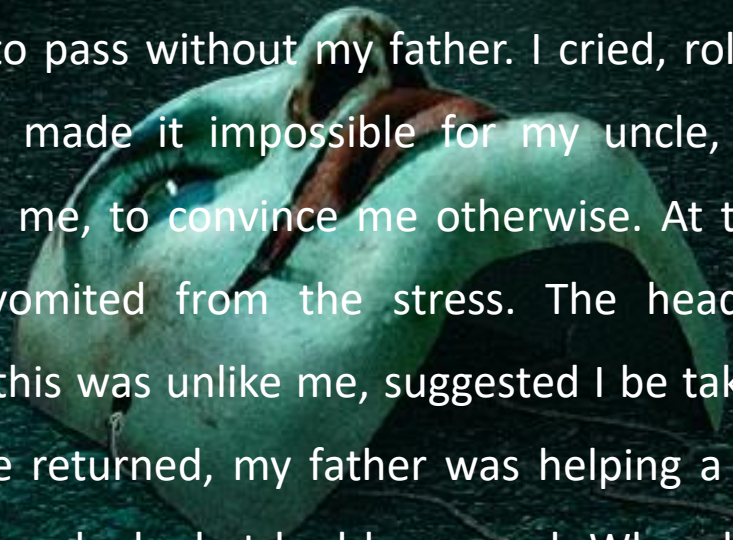
My father had a way of thinking that set him apart. He cared deeply for people, especially children. Even when life hurt him—through exhaustion, accidents, or hardship—his first concern was always us. He made sure we were safe before thinking about his own pain. His kindness extended beyond family. Friends, strangers, even friends of friends—he helped them all when he could, whether with food, money, or simply attention. He wasn't rich, but he was loved, and his presence drew people of all ages toward him.

Weekends mattered to him. No matter how tired he was, he tried to make them special. Sometimes he took us to his workplace so we could see how he spent his days. Other times, he took us for walks as a family—my father, my mother, my brother, and me. He bought us ice cream, let us play in bouncing castles, and made sure we laughed. And when we stayed home, he made sure we ate well. Those moments felt small then, but they stayed with me.

One night at a supermarket still lives clearly in my memory. I was about seven years old when I met a girl

who worked there with her mother, the cashier. She was confident, kind, and unusually bright to me. She invited me to play, and for that evening, she showed me different corners of the store as if it were a world of its own. We talked, we laughed, and for a moment, time felt suspended. When my father finished shopping, he called me and gently said it was time to go. She said goodbye, we exchanged names, and that was the last time I ever saw her. It was a simple moment—but it taught me how brief and meaningful connections could be.

Not all memories were gentle. One morning, when my mother was away, I refused to go to school. I didn't want the day to pass without my father. I cried, rolled in the dirt, and made it impossible for my uncle, who was escorting me, to convince me otherwise. At the school gate, I vomited from the stress. The head teacher, noticing this was unlike me, suggested I be taken home. When we returned, my father was helping a friend lay bricks. He asked what had happened. When he heard I had refused school, he reacted harshly. The slap that followed didn't hurt as much as the silence afterward. I



went to bed and cried quietly, knowing I had crossed a line. That day stayed with me—not because of the pain, but because it taught me that love and discipline sometimes arrive together, even when they don't feel fair.

Those were some of the moments that shaped me during the years my mother was away. And speaking of my mother—she is a very special person to me. Even now, I struggle to say the words I love you out loud. I don't know where that fear began, only that it exists. Perhaps it formed in moments when emotions were felt deeply but spoken carefully. Her story, like mine, deserves its own space.

CHAPTER TWO – Mother, Discipline, and the Lessons I Understood Too Late

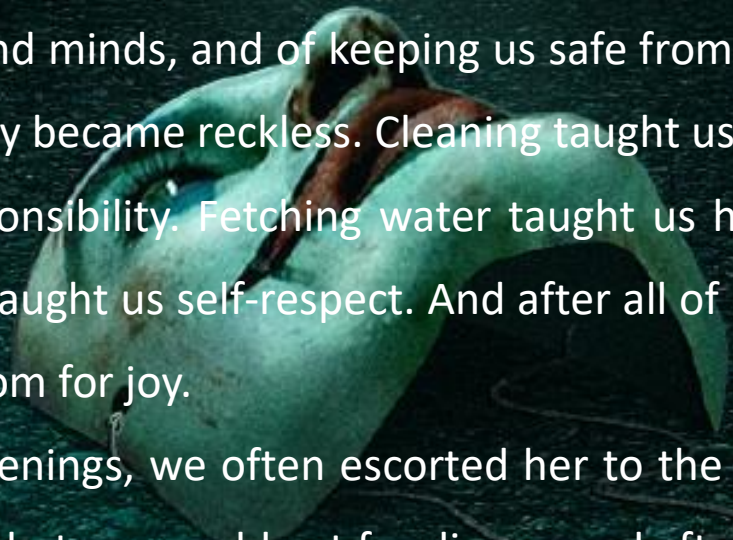
There are small things about my mother that still return to me without warning. Sometimes it's the way she cooked. She had a particular style—one that didn't need an introduction. I could smell the food and immediately know it was hers. Bananas mixed with beans, sometimes with a bit of cheese. Even now, I think about it and feel a quiet longing for those meals. Food, in our home, was

more than nourishment; it was comfort, routine, and care.

At the time, many of the things my mother made us do felt like punishment. She insisted we wash our own clothes before she did the rest. She made us clean utensils, fetch water, bathe properly, and rest during the day. As children, we complained. We thought she was being strict, even unfair. But looking back now, I see something else entirely. She was grooming us. Teaching us how to carry ourselves. Preparing us for a future where no one would do these things for us.

Daytime naps, which we hated, were her way of teaching us the importance of rest—of protecting our bodies and minds, and of keeping us safe from accidents when play became reckless. Cleaning taught us discipline and responsibility. Fetching water taught us hard work. Bathing taught us self-respect. And after all of it, she still made room for joy.

In the evenings, we often escorted her to the shop. She bought what we would eat for dinner, and afterward, we watched movies together. She loved movies. When everything was done, she would serve us food and tea,

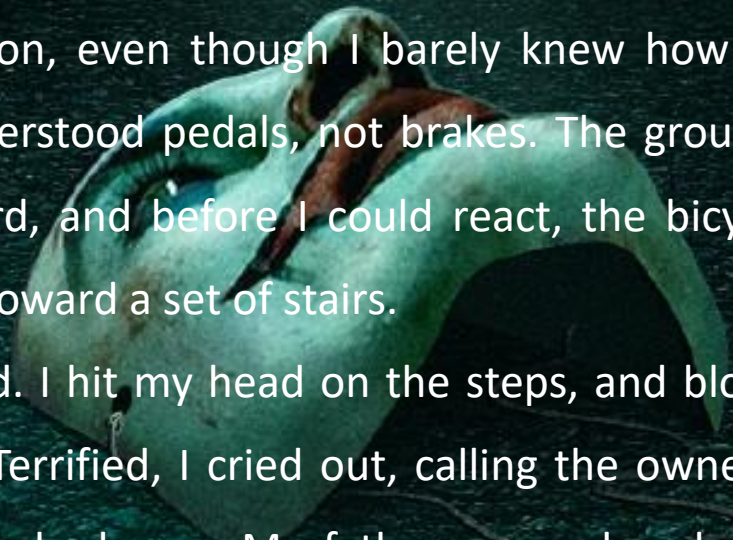


switch off the lights, and let the glow of the screen fill the room. We waited like that for my father, who often came home late and left early in the morning. Those moments—quiet, warm, ordinary—still live with me.

There are three moments involving my mother that I will never forget, each marked by fear, pain, and lessons I only understood much later.

The first happened on a day I was supposed to be resting indoors. My father hadn't gone to work and decided to step out briefly. Curious and restless, I followed him without permission. On the way, I noticed my neighbor's bicycle—the one I always begged to ride. That day, temptation won. I pulled it behind the house and climbed on, even though I barely knew how to ride. I only understood pedals, not brakes. The ground sloped downward, and before I could react, the bicycle rolled straight toward a set of stairs.

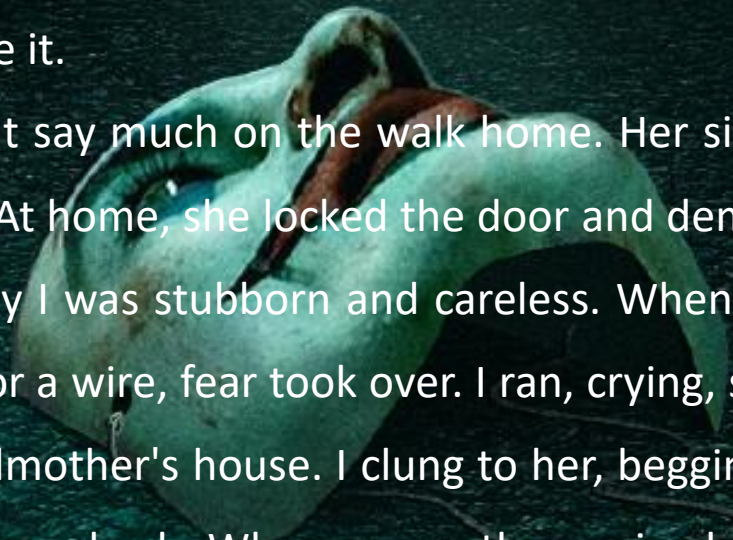
I fell hard. I hit my head on the steps, and blood began to flow. Terrified, I cried out, calling the owner's name. People rushed over. My father pressed a cloth against my head, and my mother quickly arranged for a boda boda to take me to the hospital. I was stitched that day.



Even now, I carry the scar—right between my eyes, stretching toward my forehead. It was painful, frightening, and unforgettable. Over the years, people have told me it makes me look distinctive, even cute. But to me, it's a reminder of how quickly curiosity can turn into danger.

The second moment happened at school. I admired responsibility, even as a child. One day, I decided to clean the chalkboard for the teacher. Part of it was too high, so I climbed onto a chair. I wasn't playing. I wasn't jumping. But the chair broke beneath me. The incident was reported, and when my mother came to pick me up, she was told I had broken school property and needed to replace it.

She didn't say much on the walk home. Her silence said enough. At home, she locked the door and demanded to know why I was stubborn and careless. When she went to look for a wire, fear took over. I ran, crying, straight to my grandmother's house. I clung to her, begging her not to let me go back. When my mother arrived, emotions were already high. In her anger, she struck my grandmother's hand by accident. That stopped



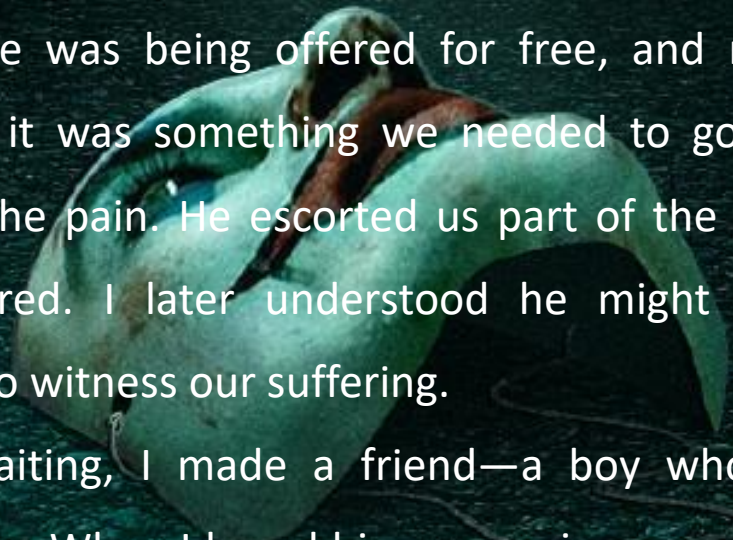
everything. My grandmother intervened, then finally allowed my mother to discipline me.

That day hurt—not just physically, but emotionally. My mother was under pressure, struggling with school fees, responsibilities, and stress. I had added to her burden. Two weeks later, my father quietly bought me a new chair. I carried it to school myself. From that day on, it was known as my chair. No one used it without my permission. I was in Primary Two. It was humiliating and empowering at the same time.

The third memory is the most painful of all.

It was the time my brother and I were circumcised. We were still young, around six to eight years old. The procedure was being offered for free, and my father believed it was something we needed to go through, despite the pain. He escorted us part of the way, then disappeared. I later understood he might not have wanted to witness our suffering.

While waiting, I made a friend—a boy who entered before me. When I heard him screaming moments later, fear settled deep inside me. When my turn came, I lay on the bed, unsure of what was about to happen. The



doctor tested the anesthesia. It didn't work properly. After several attempts, he proceeded anyway.

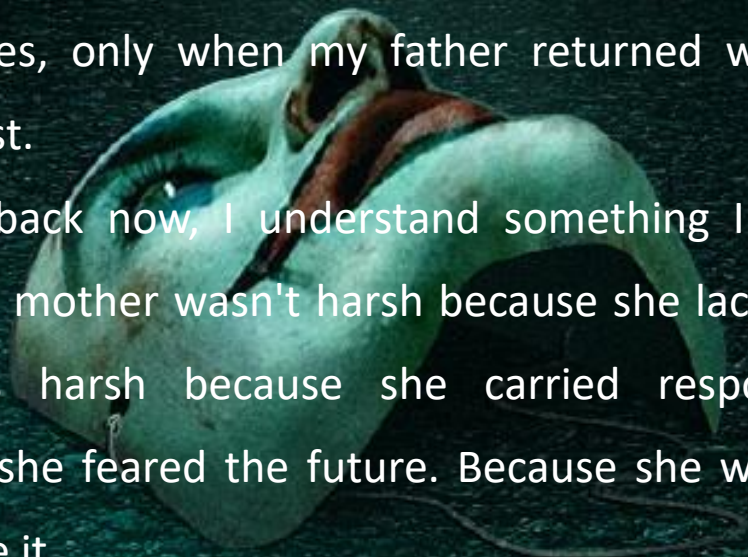
I felt everything.

I screamed. My mother held me tightly and told me not to move. When I couldn't stop shaking, she slapped me—not out of cruelty, but fear that my movement would make things worse. The procedure ended. I walked out the same way my friend had—silent, broken, and changed.

Back home, people congratulated us with clothes, caps, and small gifts. They celebrated our "bravery." But the nights that followed were long and painful. Sleep was hard to find. My mother cared for us until we healed. Sometimes, only when my father returned would we finally rest.

Looking back now, I understand something I couldn't then. My mother wasn't harsh because she lacked love. She was harsh because she carried responsibility. Because she feared the future. Because she wanted us to survive it.

And maybe that's why, even today, I struggle to say I love you out loud.

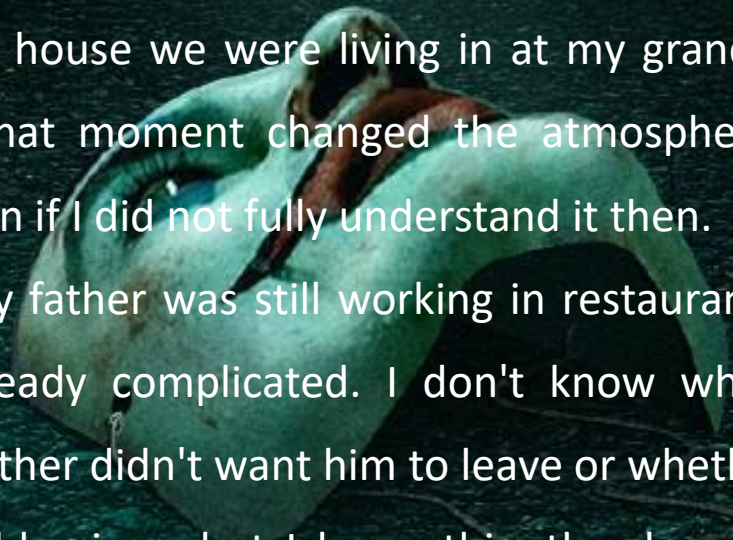


As I write this, I am twenty years old. I turned twenty on August 27, 2025, yet in many ways, I feel much older than my age. Life has taught me things too early.

At this stage of my life, my relationship with my mother sits in a quiet tension. There is love between us, but also a silent misunderstanding. Deep down, I sense that she believes I do not care enough about her, that I do not love her the way she expects. She sees only the small things I fail to do, not realizing how much those same things weigh on me too.

I cannot remember the exact moment when this distance began. But I do remember when our struggles started to feel heavier — the day my father walked away from the house we were living in at my grandmother's home. That moment changed the atmosphere of our lives, even if I did not fully understand it then.

When my father was still working in restaurants, things were already complicated. I don't know whether my grandmother didn't want him to leave or whether he left without blessings, but I know this: the day we moved was not a happy one. My father had shown us the new house before, when it was still under construction.



When we finally relocated, it had no electricity. The inside was dark—so dark it felt unfamiliar, almost unwelcoming. We placed our belongings where we could. That first night, a neighbor cooked rice and sent us a plate as a welcoming gesture. That rice became our dinner. We ate, then slept early.

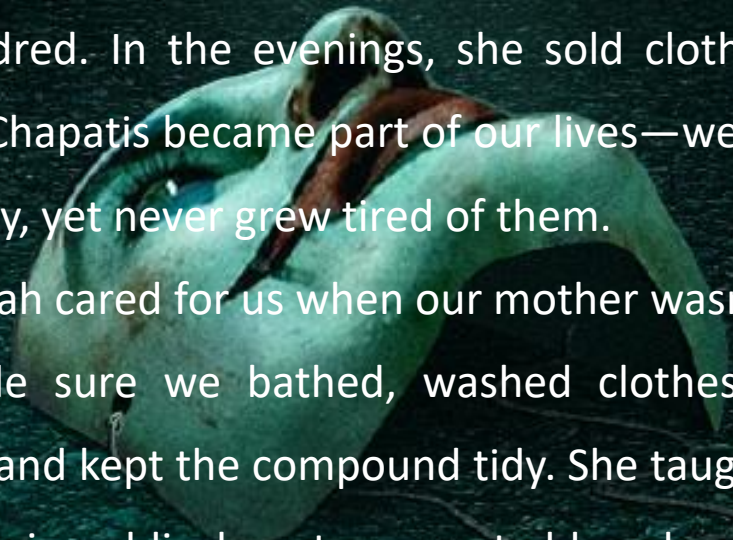
The days that followed were filled with adjustment. My father spent most of his time arranging the house, and we helped where we could. For a long while, we lived in darkness. At some point, a neighbor allowed us to connect to their electricity, and for a brief time, our house had light. After about six months, that connection was taken away. By then, my father had lost his restaurant job. Despite this, he managed to make friends in the area—people who sometimes helped us with food. Eventually, he decided to send us back to our grandmother's home in town so we could continue school, even though no one knew where the money would come from.

My mother, struggling with breathing problems made worse by dust and unfinished construction, went to stay with her sisters for a while. We remained at my

grandmother's place. That was when I began to understand something important: no matter how much good you do for people, not everyone will be happy to live with you, appreciate you, or love you the same way. Things changed quickly. Attitudes shifted. We began to feel it—in words, in silence, and in behavior.

At my grandmother's home, there were people who shaped my survival, and others who made life harder. One of the most significant was Mam Sarah. She was a lame woman who made chapatis every day. What began as a small effort turned into her livelihood. Year after year, she worked almost without rest. She sold chapatis first for two hundred shillings, then three hundred, then five hundred. In the evenings, she sold clothes at the market. Chapatis became part of our lives—we ate them constantly, yet never grew tired of them.

Mam Sarah cared for us when our mother wasn't around. She made sure we bathed, washed clothes, cleaned utensils, and kept the compound tidy. She taught us how to behave in public, how to respect elders, how to listen. Like our mother, she made us sleep during the day. At the time, we thought she was harsh. She reported us



when we misbehaved and could not keep secrets. She spoke too much. But she was not a bad person. She packed chapatis for us to eat before school and carried some for us to eat at school. Many nights, the leftover chapatis were our dinner. As children, our silent prayer was always that chapatis would remain in the baskets.

Then there was my grandmother—Jaja. She was a woman who refused to eat alone. No matter where she went, she came back carrying something for others. People talked about her habit of returning from events with a black polythene bag. It was true. But she did it so that those who stayed behind could also share in what she received. Sometimes it wasn't a full meal—just a piece of cake wrapped in a serviette and placed in her handbag. But she always remembered others.

She sold Mam Sarah's chapatis at school, passing them through the window using a long stick. Later, she sold them in the center as well, serving regular customers. She worked quietly, steadily, ensuring that something—anything—came home.

CHAPTER THREE – Holy Days, Loud Music, and Borrowed Happiness

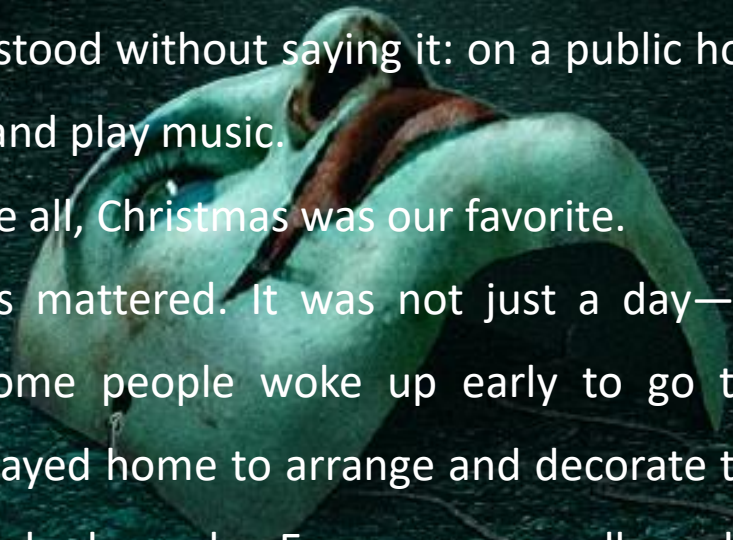
There were days that made our years count—days at the beginning, middle, and end of the year that felt larger than ordinary time. Public and holy days carried a different weight. They were moments we waited for with impatience, days that broke through hardship like light through cracks.

Id days were among those moments. When they came, everything changed. Music was always loud. We danced freely. We ate without counting. We laughed without fear. No matter how bad things had been before, those days demanded respect. Uncle John usually bought what we needed to cook—food, drinks, even ice to cool them. To us, public holidays were sacred. There was a rule we all understood without saying it: on a public holiday, you eat well and play music.

But above all, Christmas was our favorite.

Christmas mattered. It was not just a day—it was an event. Some people woke up early to go to church. Others stayed home to arrange and decorate the house. Everyone had a role. Everyone was allowed to invite friends. Celebration was shared.

Sometimes, decorating started the night before. My

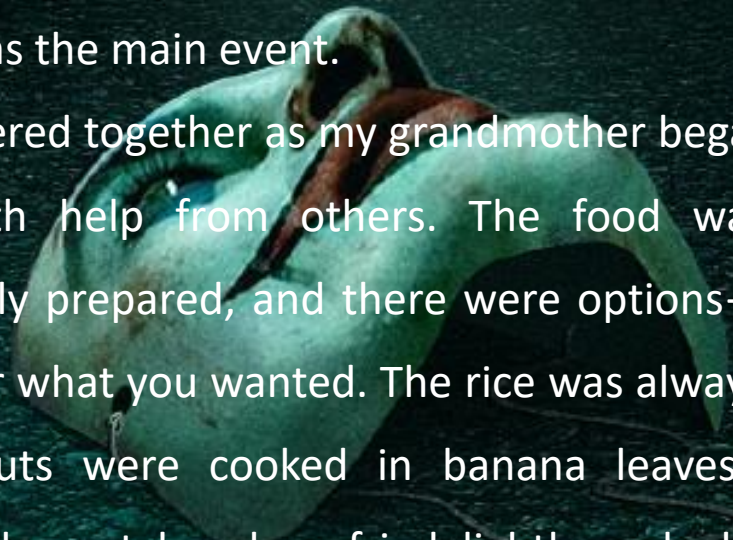


grandmother and others would wake up in the middle of the night to begin preparing the sitting room. Cooking began early. Everything needed for the day was carefully planned. Mam Sarah, being Muslim, usually traveled to the village to spend the day with her people. It was difficult to celebrate Christmas with her present, since alcohol and pork were part of the tradition, and we respected her beliefs.

When morning came, the compound came alive. Tasks were divided naturally. Some people cut hens. Others cut meat into pieces. Rice was cooked. Utensils were washed. The compound was cleaned. Speakers were connected. Music filled the air.

Lunch was the main event.

We gathered together as my grandmother began serving food with help from others. The food was always beautifully prepared, and there were options—you had to ask for what you wanted. The rice was always perfect. Groundnuts were cooked in banana leaves. Chicken came in three styles: deep-fried, lightly cooked with little sauce, and another with rich soup. Meat was prepared the same way. There were juices, sodas, beer, and other



drinks.

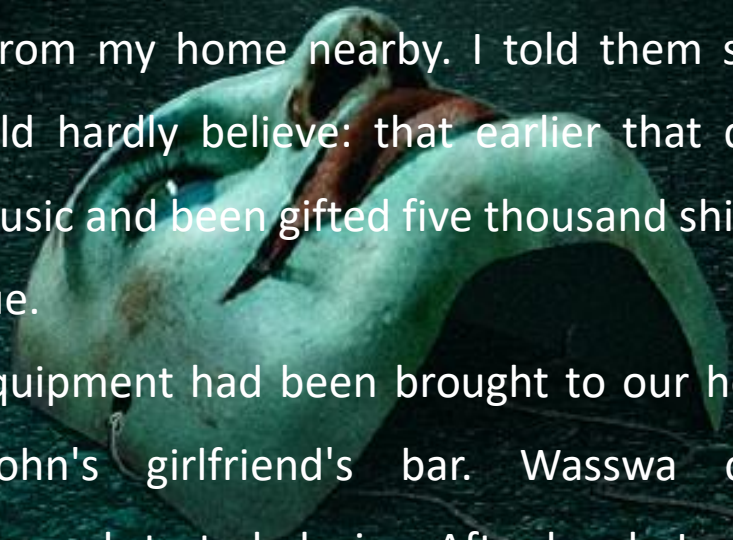
Sometimes Uncle John's girlfriends brought extra gifts—chapatis, juice, snacks, cakes, or small presents for my grandmother. We ate until even the smell of food felt heavy in our bodies.

Afterward, everyone scattered into their own happiness. Some washed utensils. Some played. Some sat and talked. Others stayed close to the music. My brother and I were deeply drawn to music. If we weren't near the speakers, we were outside playing with friends.

One Christmas evening, after everything had gone well, I slipped to my neighbor's home—my friend's place. They were celebrating too. As we talked, we listened to music coming from my home nearby. I told them something they could hardly believe: that earlier that day, I had played music and been gifted five thousand shillings.

It was true.

Sound equipment had been brought to our home from Uncle John's girlfriend's bar. Wasswa connected everything and started playing. After lunch, I sat at Uncle John's door, waiting for a chance to ask Wasswa if I could play. He refused.



But since it was a day of celebration, someone inside noticed me and asked what I wanted—food, a drink, or to dance. I smiled and pointed at the DJ equipment. They told Wasswa to let me play two songs and warned me jokingly that if I played badly, they would kill me.

Unexpectedly, I delivered.

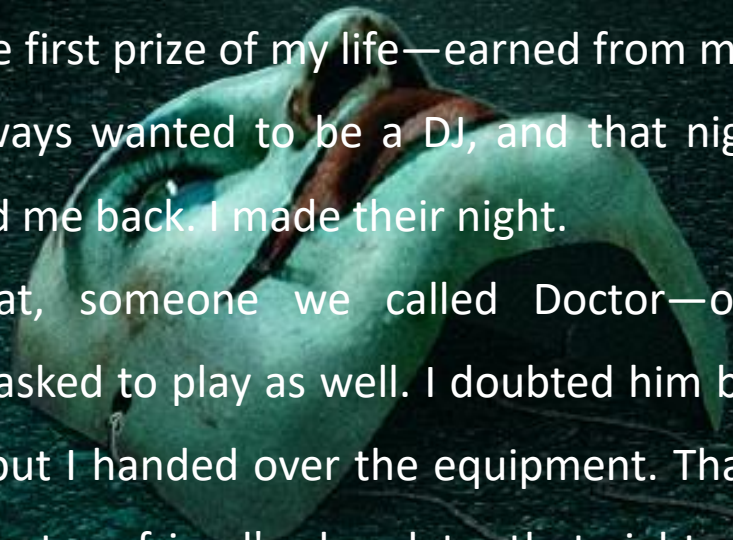
The song playing was Hot Dis Year Riddim. I mixed into Pose Off. People were shocked. I played songs no one expected me to know. The crowd reacted immediately. Laughter turned into excitement. And right there, someone handed me a five-thousand-shilling note.

That moment changed something inside me.

It was the first prize of my life—earned from my passion. I had always wanted to be a DJ, and that night, music answered me back. I made their night.

After that, someone we called Doctor—our family doctor—asked to play as well. I doubted him because of his age, but I handed over the equipment. That is how I ended up at my friend's place later that night.

He was there with his brother, sister, and our friends Gideon and Ibra. Ibra was the most spoiled among



us—disliked throughout the village for his manners, language, and attitude. People said he corrupted younger kids.

That night, he asked me if there were girls our age at my place. I thought of my aunties and said yes. He asked about food and drinks. I told him food was finished, but drinks were plenty. He asked how he could get some.

I offered to bring him one.

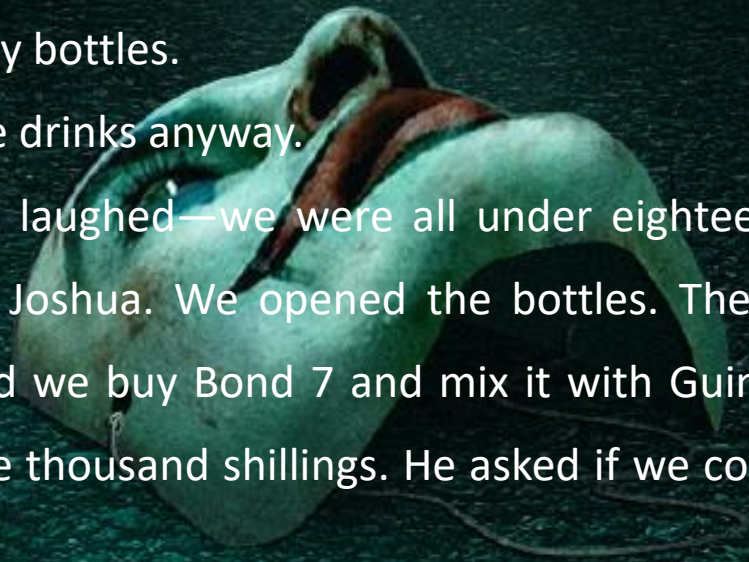
I asked what he drank. He said Guinness. Jordan and his brother declined because of their religion. I ran home. While there, I was sent to call Gideon. I went inside, grabbed two bottles of Guinness, and sneaked out. On my way down, I was caught. They warned me to return the empty bottles.

I took the drinks anyway.

Everyone laughed—we were all under eighteen except Ibra and Joshua. We opened the bottles. Then Joshua suggested we buy Bond 7 and mix it with Guinness. He had three thousand shillings. He asked if we could finish it.

We said yes.

We bought it. Mixed it half and half. Drank everything.



They stared at me. They knew I was underage. They knew I couldn't handle alcohol. But that day was my first time getting drunk—and it felt incredible.

Joshua joked that I was still active. They laughed. Then he bet five thousand that I couldn't stand on one leg. I tried. My body felt impossibly heavy, like a ten-kilogram bag of maize flour had been placed on my shoulders. I failed. Laughter exploded.

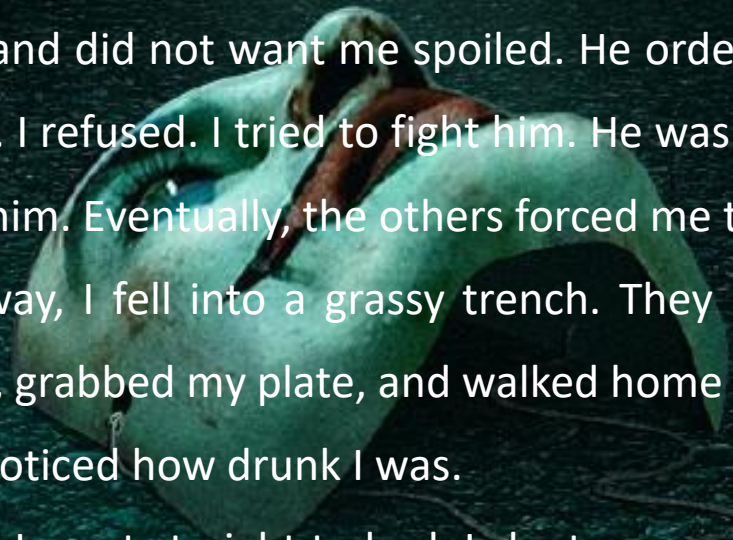
I laughed too—uncontrollably. Then I collapsed and fell asleep on the ground. When they helped me up, they debated how to get me home. Jordan, my best friend, was chosen to escort me.

Joshua's older brother arrived on a boda boda. He knew me well and did not want me spoiled. He ordered me to go home. I refused. I tried to fight him. He was lame, so I mocked him. Eventually, the others forced me to leave.

On the way, I fell into a grassy trench. They laughed. I stood up, grabbed my plate, and walked home alone.

No one noticed how drunk I was.

At home, I went straight to bed. I slept on a mattress on the floor. As I bent to tuck in the mosquito net, I hit my head on the wall. I fell and slept there until morning.



During the night, I vomited—too much food, too much alcohol.

In the morning, we had breakfast. I was assigned to wash utensils. I said ok then slipped out the back door and went to Jordan's place. Everyone laughed when they saw me.

"I'm sober now," I said.

I had a terrible hangover. My head hurt. My body hurt. Jordan bought me a cold Mirinda Apple from Mam Haira's shop. It helped.

Later, we went swimming at Passions. It cost five thousand plus transport. It was Boxing Day. Despite the hangover, it was fun.

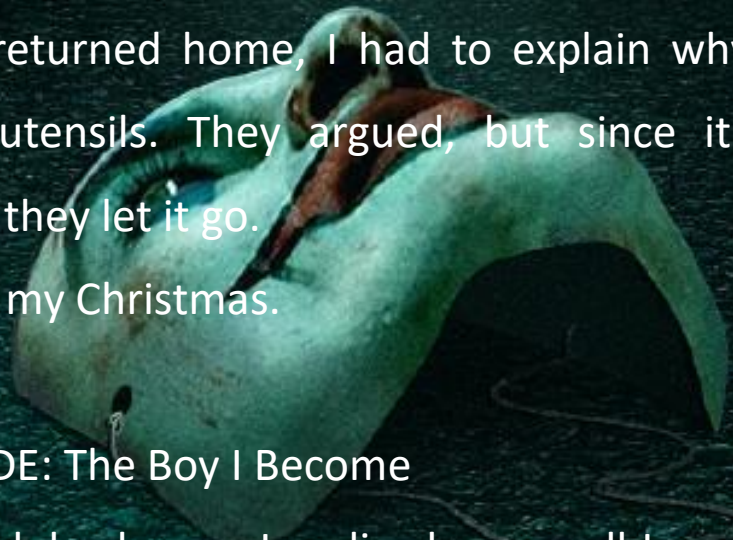
When I returned home, I had to explain why I hadn't washed utensils. They argued, but since it was still holidays, they let it go.

That was my Christmas.

INTERLUDE: The Boy I Become

*"As I look back now, I realize how small I was, yet how much I was already feeling.

I was a boy who watched more than he spoke, who



loved deeply but didn't know how to say it, and who found comfort in music, water, and quiet moments to himself.

I did not know then that life was about to change in ways I could never imagine.

I did not know that joy would soon be mixed with loss, and that growing up would hurt more than I expected.

This is the end of my childhood — and the beginning of a different life." *

PART TWO: AFTER HE LEFT

Chapter One – The House That Changed

When my father left, the house did not fall apart all at once.

It changed quietly, room by room.

The space we once called ours was taken over by his brother. Another brother moved into the room that had belonged to my father. Walls stayed where they were, but meaning shifted. What used to feel familiar began to feel borrowed. The main house grew slightly larger, and somewhere within that rearrangement, space was made for us to live again. For about a year, that became our version of home.

Not long after, our mother returned.

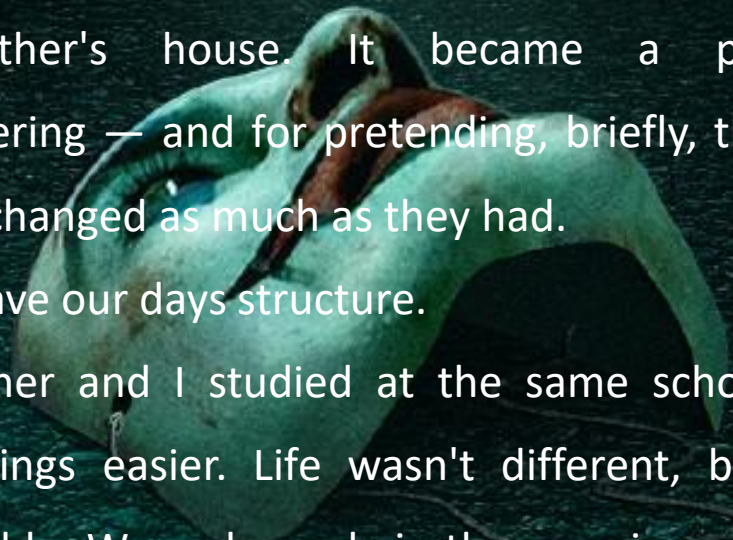
She did not stay long.

She asked to take our youngest brother, Aaron, to live with her. When she left with him, something subtle but permanent settled among us. The rest of us remained behind, learning — without anyone explaining it — what separation feels like when it arrives quietly and stays.

There were moments when my brother and I wandered into the narrow back corridor that led to our father's old room. We would sit there, sometimes without speaking, sometimes imagining what life might have felt like if we were still together as a family. We went there after being blamed, punished, or misunderstood by people in my grandmother's house. It became a place for remembering — and for pretending, briefly, that things had not changed as much as they had.

School gave our days structure.

My brother and I studied at the same school, which made things easier. Life wasn't different, but it was manageable. We woke early in the morning and walked to school carrying simple food — a chapati or cake packed in a container, juice, and a small amount of



money for break time. In the evening, we returned home, changed our clothes, and did what was expected of us.

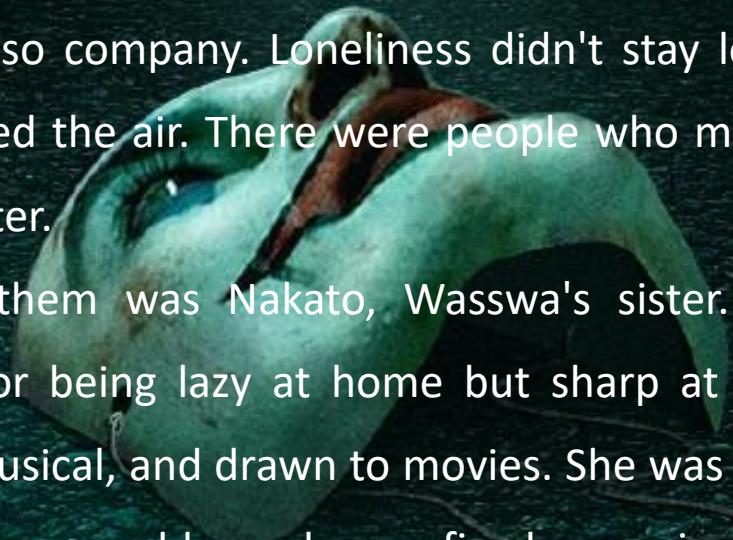
Chores were shared carefully and rotated to feel fair. One day you washed utensils. The next, you swept the compound. Another day, you mopped the house or carried baskets from the shop — especially the chapati baskets. The work was tiring, repetitive, and unavoidable. Still, it taught us rhythm. Responsibility came early, whether we were ready or not.

Some days were heavy.

Others surprised us with laughter.

The house was always full of people, which meant stress — but also company. Loneliness didn't stay long when noise filled the air. There were people who made those days lighter.

One of them was Nakato, Wasswa's sister. She was known for being lazy at home but sharp at school — clever, musical, and drawn to movies. She was respected in the house, and her role was fixed: mopping. Washing utensils never interested her, so chores had been divided long before we arrived. Nakato mopped. Kisitu — who



later became known as DJ C2 — washed utensils. Wasswa handled the rest: cleaning the compound and smaller tasks.

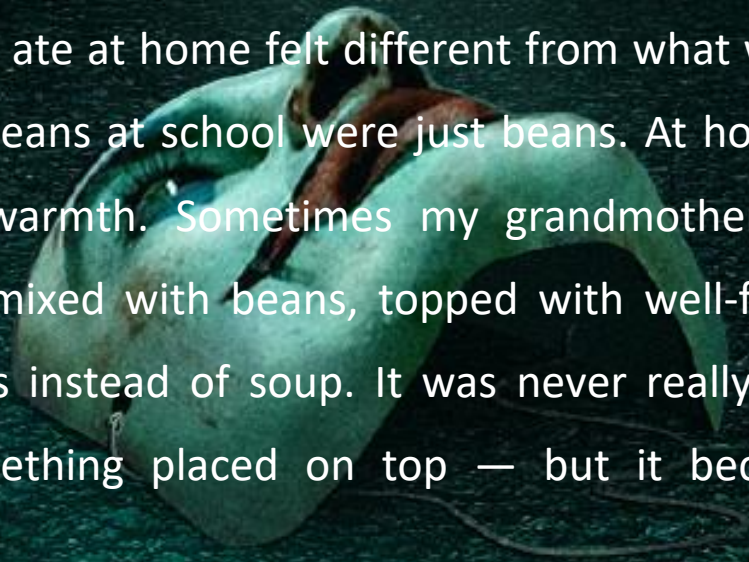
When my brother and I joined the household, it felt like their time to retire. Their responsibilities slowly became ours. We worked in turns, accepting it because there was no alternative. Some days were overwhelming. Other days, Mam Sarah helped us, especially with washing utensils. When that happened, we handled the remaining errands — going to the shop, fetching items, preparing things needed around the house.

After everything was done, we were given food.

And food mattered.

What we ate at home felt different from what we ate at school. Beans at school were just beans. At home, they carried warmth. Sometimes my grandmother cooked cassava mixed with beans, topped with well-fried cow intestines instead of soup. It was never really soup — just something placed on top — but it became my favorite.

The burnt part of the cassava, where sweetness and smoke met, belonged to me and my brother. We



competed for it quietly, each trying to be the first to ask. Sometimes we negotiated ahead of time: one of us claimed the creamy top of milk, the other the burnt cassava. Our grandmother always agreed, smiling as if happiness was something she could divide fairly.

She made sure everyone felt seen.

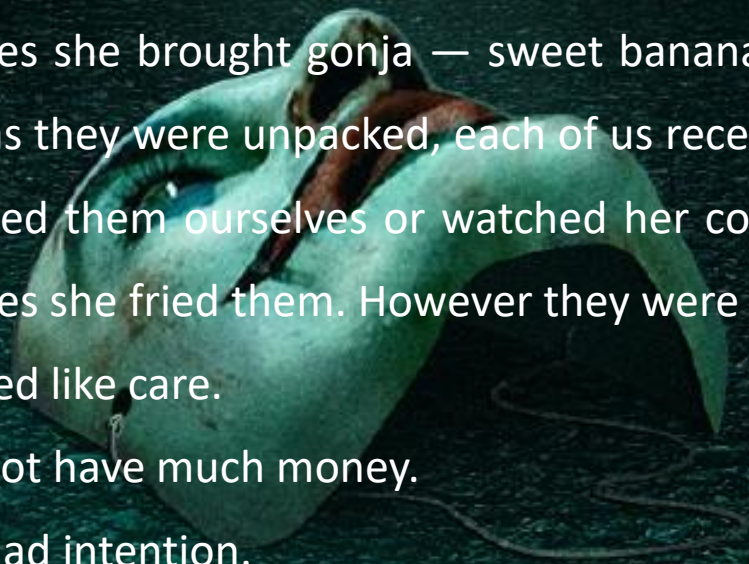
Whenever she went to the city to buy clothes for Mam Sarah to sell in the evening, she never returned empty-handed. She came back with small gifts — a T-shirt, socks, a pair of trousers — something for someone. If someone needed shoes, she found a way. If someone needed comfort, she offered it without asking why.

Sometimes she brought gonja — sweet bananas — and as soon as they were unpacked, each of us received one. We roasted them ourselves or watched her cook them. Sometimes she fried them. However they were prepared, they tasted like care.

She did not have much money.

But she had intention.

When school time came, she bought us exercise books, rulers, and pens. She filled gaps with what little she had,



making sure our needs were met just enough to keep us going.

Looking back now, I understand something I didn't then.

That house was not easy.

But it taught me how people survive when love must stretch further than resources.

Chapter Two – School, Safety, and the First Loss

School became my second home — not because it was easier, but because it made sense. There were rules, schedules, and expectations that didn't shift overnight. You arrived in the morning, learned what you were taught, did what you were told, and went home. In a life that was slowly rearranging itself without warning, that structure mattered.

My grandmother was well known at the school. Many people from our area had studied there before us and grown into responsible adults. Because of that history, she was respected. When I joined, teachers asked about my background, and she explained it simply — not dramatically, not defensively. Just honestly.

Academically, I wasn't the brightest student, but I wasn't weak either. I stayed somewhere in the middle —

usually among the top fifteen or twenty students in a class of nearly fifty. Sometimes I surprised myself and entered the top ten. Other times, I slipped back. My performance wasn't stable, but I cared. That effort mattered more than rankings, even if I didn't realize it then.

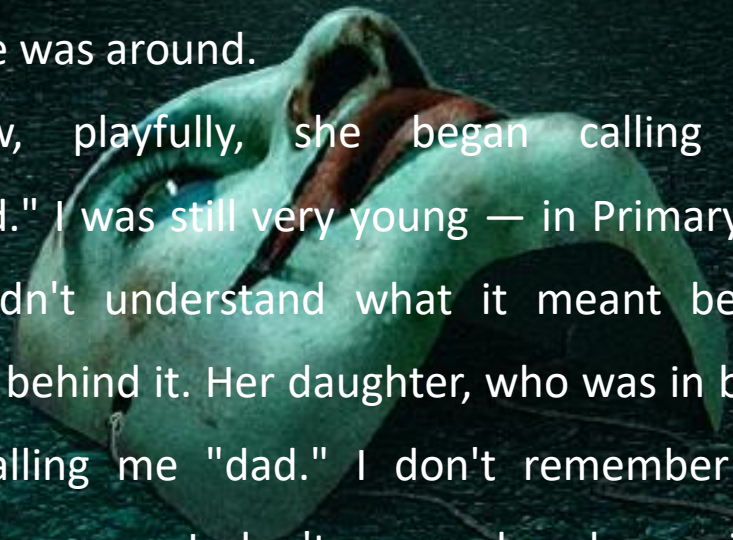
There was one teacher who changed how school felt to me.

Her name was Joweria Kakaire.

She was beautiful, kind, and full of life. She didn't teach the way others did — she made learning feel human. Where boredom lived, she brought humor. Where fear existed, she softened it with laughter. Class felt lighter when she was around.

Somehow, playfully, she began calling me her "husband." I was still very young — in Primary Three — and I didn't understand what it meant beyond the affection behind it. Her daughter, who was in baby class, began calling me "dad." I don't remember her face clearly anymore. I don't remember her voice. What stayed with me were their smiles.

Then one day, everything stopped.



We were in class when we heard screaming outside — crying loud enough to break attention. Someone ran past the windows shouting that Teacher Joweria had died. At first, no one believed it. She had been sick for a few days, but sickness was common. Death felt impossible.

It wasn't.

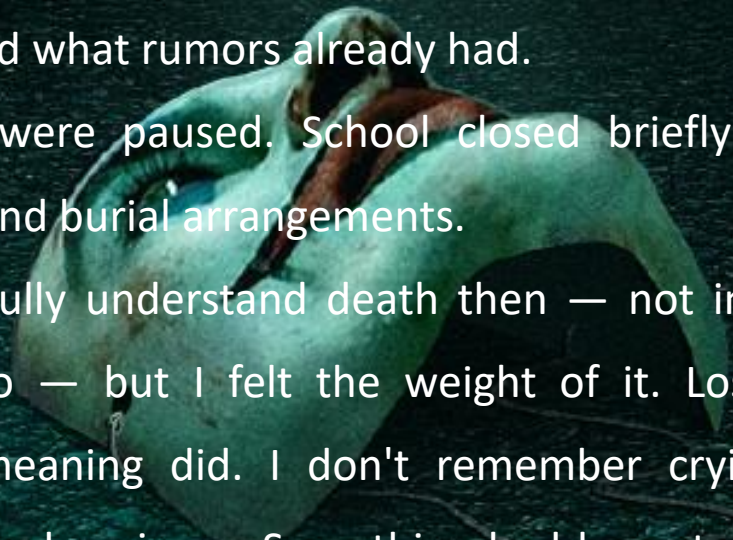
She had been admitted to the hospital. That's where she passed away.

People cried openly. Some students fainted. Teachers rushed to gather us for an emergency assembly. The bell rang, pulling students back from classrooms, from lunch, from confusion. When the teachers spoke, their voices confirmed what rumors already had.

Lessons were paused. School closed briefly to allow prayers and burial arrangements.

I didn't fully understand death then — not in the way adults do — but I felt the weight of it. Loss arrived before meaning did. I don't remember crying, but I remember heaviness. Something had been taken, and I didn't know how to name it.

On the way home that day, I walked alone across a sandy



playground. As I crossed, strong winds blew dust into the air, blinding me. For a moment, it felt like walking through a desert storm. I couldn't see clearly where I was going, only where I had been. I kept moving anyway. She was buried the same day. She was Muslim.

When we returned to school a week later, nothing felt the same. Silence sat where laughter used to be. Lessons continued, but something had shifted. Over time, the feeling faded — not because it healed, but because life demanded forward motion.

Days became weeks.

Weeks became months.

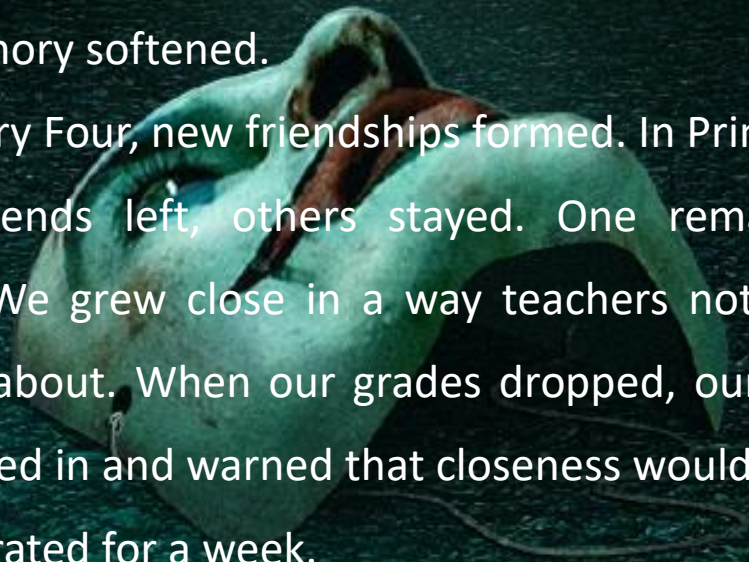
Months became years.

And memory softened.

By Primary Four, new friendships formed. In Primary Five, some friends left, others stayed. One remained — Patrick. We grew close in a way teachers noticed and worried about. When our grades dropped, our families were called in and warned that closeness would ruin us. We separated for a week.

It didn't last.

Instead, we competed — pushing each other to do



better, not worse. And it worked.

Change came again when a new head teacher took over the school. He was known for discipline, confidence, and seriousness. New teachers arrived. New students followed — many from wealthier families, confident, fluent in English, dressed differently.

One of them became my friend.

At first, we laughed at his name printed on his shorts — folded in a way that read like an insult in our local language. We laughed quietly, assuming he wouldn't understand us. He looked at us like village children.

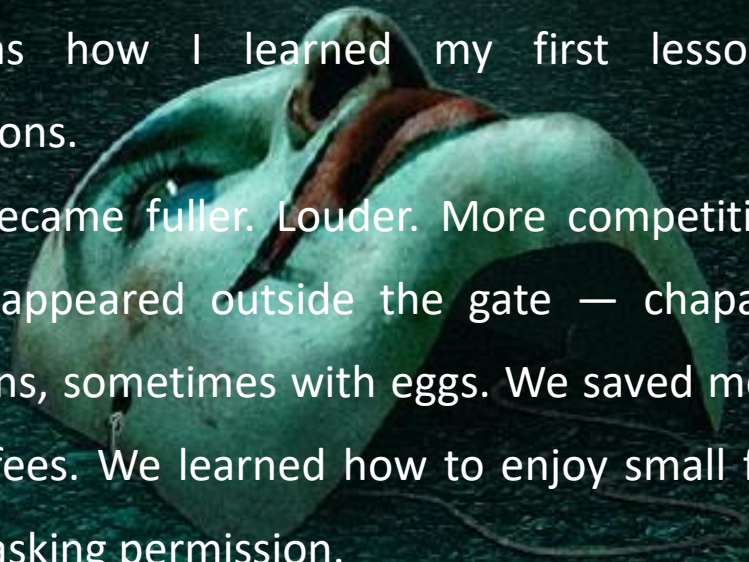
Later, we spoke.

He understood everything.

That was how I learned my first lesson about assumptions.

School became fuller. Louder. More competitive. Food vendors appeared outside the gate — chapati mixed with beans, sometimes with eggs. We saved money. We skipped fees. We learned how to enjoy small freedoms without asking permission.

Friendships expanded. Saturdays blurred into adventures. We walked long routes just to delay



responsibility. We visited each other's homes. We learned how different families lived. We laughed, studied, failed, tried again.

I didn't know it then, but something was forming.

Not innocence.

Not confidence.

Awareness.

PART TWO

From Innocence to Awareness

(Continuation + Rewritten Ending)

By the time I reached Primary Seven, something inside me had already changed.

I was no longer just a child reacting to life. I was beginning to notice life. I noticed how authority worked. I noticed how fear was used as a tool. I noticed how silence could be safer than speaking. I noticed how pain could become normal if it happened every day.

This was not confidence.

This was awareness.

My mother had gone abroad to work, and the school advised us to join boarding. At the time, it felt like a simple decision. Looking back, it was one of the first

moments where life quietly pushed me into a harder version of myself.

Boarding school did not feel like school. It felt like survival.

Mornings began with fear. The boys' patron, who also worked as an askari, would burst into the dormitory before sunrise. Many times, he was under the influence of drugs. His eyes were red. His voice was loud. His cane was always ready. If you were still sleeping, you were beaten. If you were slow, you were beaten. If you were unlucky, you were beaten.

We learned quickly:

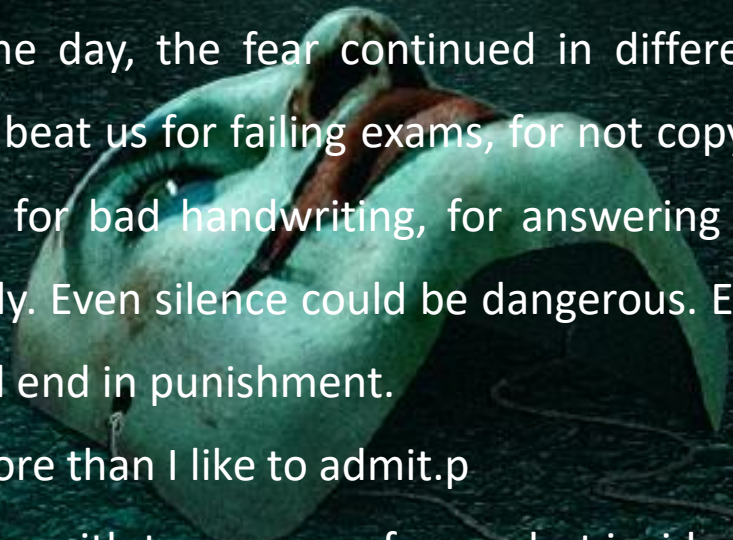
Wake up early, or learn how to hide.

During the day, the fear continued in different forms. Teachers beat us for failing exams, for not copying notes properly, for bad handwriting, for answering questions incorrectly. Even silence could be dangerous. Even trying could still end in punishment.

I cried more than I like to admit.

Not always with tears on my face — but inside.

Fear stayed with me. It followed me into class. It followed me into the dormitory. Even at night, it did not



leave. Being found outside the dormitory meant more punishment. Break time was often skipped. Lunch was sometimes rushed, sometimes denied. Hunger became normal. Pain became normal.

School stopped feeling like a place of learning.

It became a place of endurance.

And yet, something else was quietly forming inside us.

We began to understand what the teachers were really trying to do. They were preparing us for the final exams. The methods were harsh. Sometimes cruel. But beneath the fear, we started to push ourselves in ways we never had before.

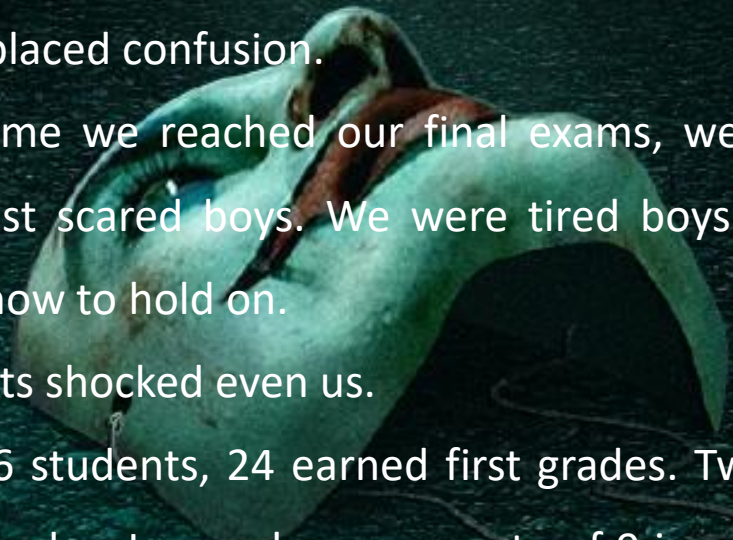
Slowly, discipline replaced panic.

Focus replaced confusion.

By the time we reached our final exams, we were no longer just scared boys. We were tired boys who had learned how to hold on.

The results shocked even us.

Out of 26 students, 24 earned first grades. Two earned second grades. I scored an aggregate of 9 in my Primary Leaving Examinations. Against fear. Against hunger. Against pain. I became one of the best.



What surprised me most was not the results.

It was how we felt about leaving.

We did not want to go.

The dormitory had become more than a place of punishment. It had become a place of brotherhood. We

had suffered together. We had been beaten together.

We had failed together. We had passed together.

Pain had connected us.

In that suffering, we became family.

That was one of the first times I truly understood something important:

Pain does not only destroy.

Sometimes, it also shapes.

It teaches you how to endure.

It teaches you how to stay quiet.

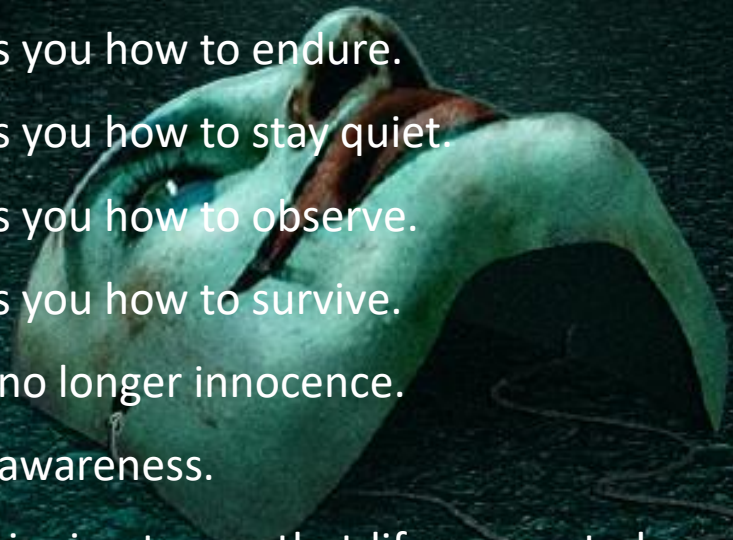
It teaches you how to observe.

It teaches you how to survive.

This was no longer innocence.

This was awareness.

I was beginning to see that life was not always fair. That authority was not always kind. That strength was not always loud. Sometimes, strength was simply staying.



Staying awake.

Staying focused.

Staying alive inside.

And without realizing it, I was being prepared for a much bigger shift.

Because Primary School had broken something in me —
But it had also built something.

I was about to enter a new world.

One where fear would not be the only teacher.

One where choices would begin to matter.

One where losing direction would become just as dangerous as being beaten.

That world was called secondary school.

And it is where my life truly began to change.

CHAPTER THREE

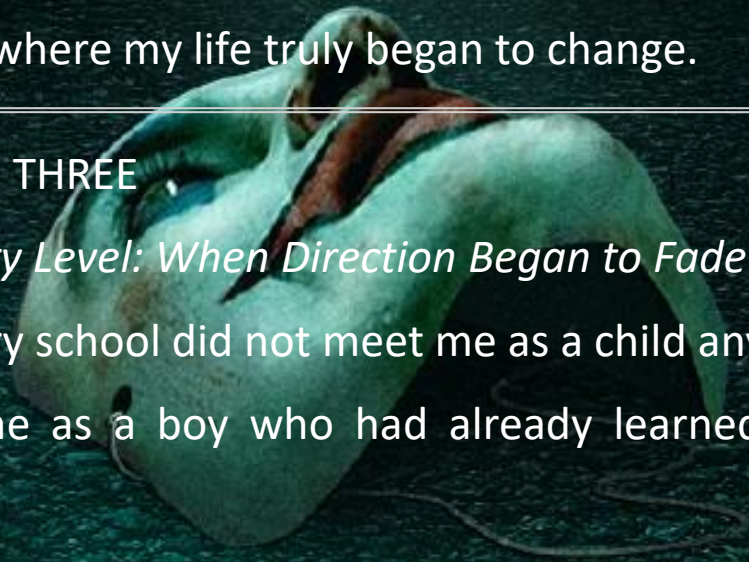
Secondary Level: When Direction Began to Fade

Secondary school did not meet me as a child anymore.

It met me as a boy who had already learned how to survive.

But survival is not the same as purpose.

In secondary school, I was no longer just afraid of punishment. I was afraid of becoming lost. I carried



discipline, but I also carried confusion. I carried strength, but I also carried unanswered questions.

This is where I began to realize something deeper:

Passing exams is not the same as knowing who you are.

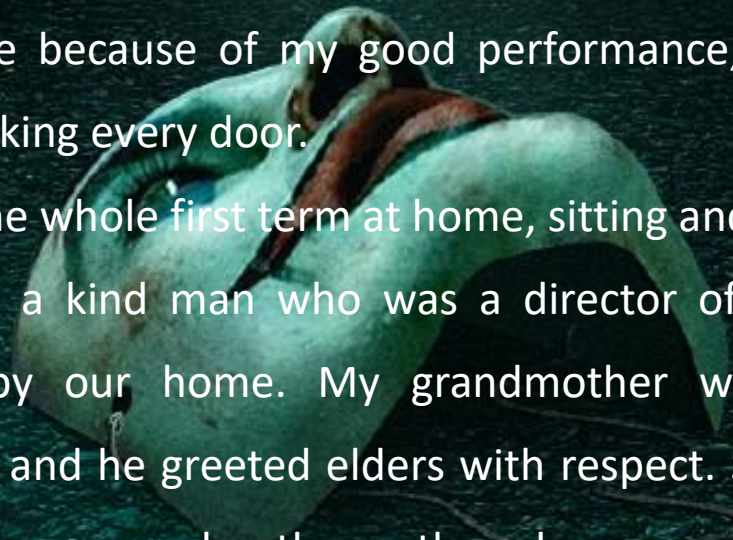
Surviving is not the same as knowing where you are going.

And slowly, without noticing at first, my direction began to fade.

When I returned from holidays at my auntie's home, I went back to my grandmother's place. Once again, we entered another war — the war for school fees. My grandmother tried her best, but we still couldn't find a school we could afford. Many schools were willing to admit me because of my good performance, but fees kept blocking every door.

I spent the whole first term at home, sitting and waiting. One day, a kind man who was a director of a school passed by our home. My grandmother was selling chapatis, and he greeted elders with respect. Seeing his character, my grandmother gathered courage and asked if she could speak to him about me.

She explained my performance and our situation. The



man listened carefully. After a short talk, he surprised us.
“Prepare him. He can start school tomorrow.”

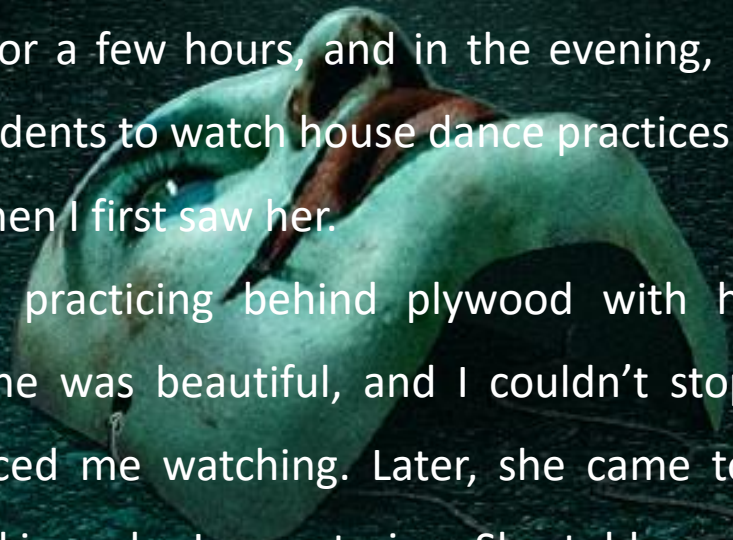
In my heart, I was scared — but also hopeful. A nearby friend was studying at that same school, which gave me courage. When Uncle John returned, we told him the news. He helped me with some money for basic requirements and pocket money.

The next morning, my grandmother and I bought what we could, and I was taken to the school. The director welcomed us and asked a student to guide me to my class.

When I entered, everyone looked at me. The way I was dressed made it seem like I came from a rich family. I studied for a few hours, and in the evening, I followed other students to watch house dance practices.

That’s when I first saw her.

She was practicing behind plywood with her house group. She was beautiful, and I couldn’t stop looking. She noticed me watching. Later, she came to me and joked, asking why I was staring. She told me her name was Ngonzi, but people called her Pretty. From that moment, we became friends.



She held my hand and told me to join their house by saying I was a newcomer. That day stayed in my mind. I went home excited and couldn't stop thinking about school.

The next days, I learned that Pretty was connected to many groups. The school was full of gangs and "cons." I was scared, but it didn't stop me from seeing her.

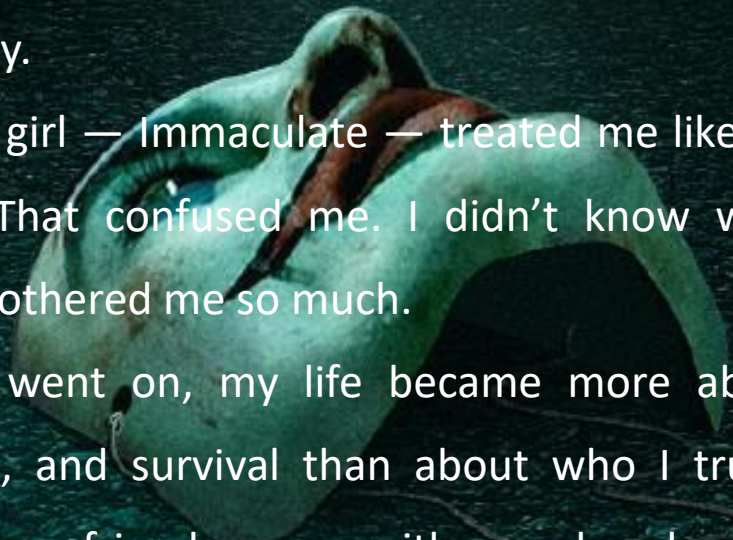
Soon, rumors started.

"Ethan, the new rich kid."

My name spread around the school. Some liked me. Some challenged me. One boy tried to bully me in class, but instead of fighting, we competed on the blackboard with math. When I won, people started seeing me differently.

Still, one girl — Immaculate — treated me like a normal person. That confused me. I didn't know why being normal bothered me so much.

As time went on, my life became more about girls, attention, and survival than about who I truly was. I made many friends, even with people who had once threatened me. I thought making friends was protection. But protection came with a price.



Violence became normal. Gangs ruled the school. Prom parties were dangerous. Students were robbed. Sometimes even the army was brought in to control the situation.

One night, I was robbed of my chain and sunglasses. I didn't report it. Reporting meant danger. Instead, I befriended the same boys who had robbed me.

My marks began to fall.

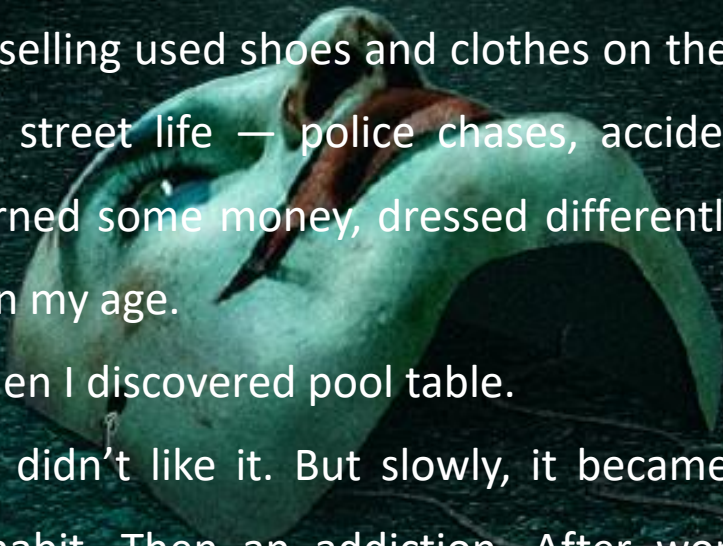
Then COVID-19 came. Schools closed. Lockdown lasted for a long time. Many people died. When schools finally reopened, my old school had new owners. They demanded full fees. We couldn't afford it.

Instead of waiting at home, I decided to work.

I worked selling used shoes and clothes on the roadside. I learned street life — police chases, accidents, theft, fear. I earned some money, dressed differently, and felt older than my age.

That's when I discovered pool table.

At first, I didn't like it. But slowly, it became a hobby. Then a habit. Then an addiction. After work, I went straight to play. I started betting. Pool table became my escape.



When I returned to school, I couldn't leave the game behind. I skipped preps. I lied at home. Uncle John began to suspect me. We played hide and seek.

Then I met Caroline.

At first, it felt like a joke. Then it became serious. I spent most of my time with her. For a while, she distracted me from the game and the streets.

But it didn't last.

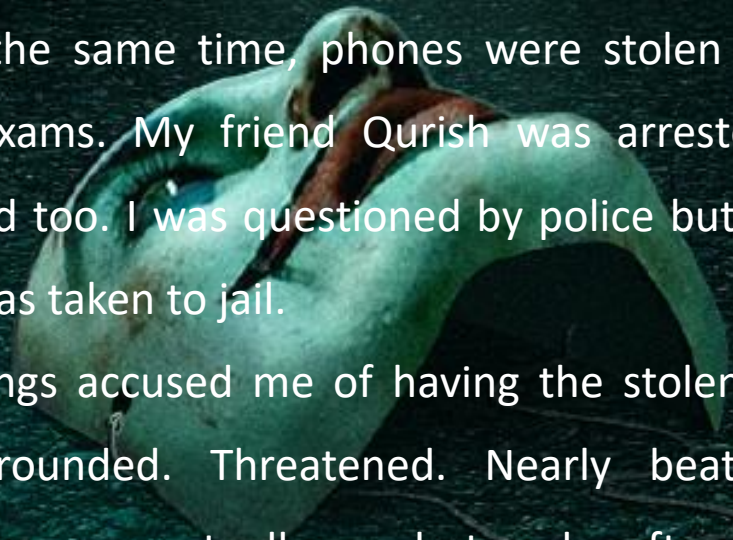
I discovered she was involved with older men for money. She promised to tattoo my name, but instead, she tattooed another man's name. That broke me in a way I can't fully explain.

I felt humiliated. Betrayed. Small.

Around the same time, phones were stolen at school during exams. My friend Qurish was arrested. I was suspected too. I was questioned by police but released. Qurish was taken to jail.

Later, gangs accused me of having the stolen phone. I was surrounded. Threatened. Nearly beaten. They believed me eventually — but only after fear had already entered my bones.

That period taught me something painful:



I was no longer in control of my life.

I was surviving — not directing.

Moving — but not progressing.

Popular — but empty.

Protected — but lost.

I had passed exams.

But I had not passed life.

That's where Part Two ends.

Not with failure — but with awareness.

End of Part Two — Awareness

By this time, I had survived many things that could have broken me.

I had seen school, streets, love, gangs, and loss.

People looked at me and thought I was strong.

But inside, I wasn't strong — I was just moving.

I was not a child anymore.

But I was not yet a man.

I had learned how to survive.

But I had not yet learned who I was becoming.

What came next would n

ot just test my body.

It would test my identity.

